



United States Senator
Richard Shelby
REPORTS TO ALABAMA



Drought Assistance Needed

By: Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL)

Mother Nature is wreaking havoc across our entire nation. As if the 2006 drought and the Easter freeze were not enough, an even more severe drought is now wilting much of the Southeast. Water is restricted, which is curtailing crops and causing premature cattle sales. Today, Alabama is experiencing the worst drought in over a century. Our agriculture industry is in dire straits.

In Alabama, producers came into 2007 having survived a drought in 2006 and ready for a great crop year. Instead, they were met with a deep freeze in April and now a drought of epic proportions. In fact, in the over 100 years of precipitation data, this year's drought will be considered the drought of record. Even with the increase in rainfall over the last few weeks, a significant portion of Alabama remains in the most severe drought category and crops continue to suffer. Faced with no grass, little hay and high corn prices, Alabama cattlemen are selling calves underweight and many are liquidating entire herds. Corn farmers who lost crops to the freeze have in large part replanted only to run up against a severe lack of rain. Eighty-two percent of Alabama's corn crop is considered in poor or very poor condition. Many cotton farmers waited until the very last possible moment to plant or chose not to plant at all. Unfortunately, in many areas of the state it is hard to tell whether a field has been planted or not. Even those who have plants above ground are well behind where they should be as we head towards what is traditionally a hot and dry period in the South. In addition, assessments of the nearly 200,000 acres of trees planted in 2006 and 2007 indicate that between 70 percent and 100 percent will be lost at a cost of between \$20 million and \$30 million. This comes on top of the hundreds of millions of dollars lost in the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. Many Alabama producers either have lost or are on the cusp of losing everything to this extraordinary weather.

Alabama's agriculture is suffering with no relief in sight. The long-term ramifications of these events are significant for the cattleman, farmer, timber landowner and consumer. We must come up with a solution to address the situation before it gets worse. Last month, I joined the entire Alabama Congressional delegation in contacting U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Michael Johanns to highlight the severity of Alabama's drought conditions and request emergency assistance for the state. In response, Alabama was declared a primary natural disaster area, making producers eligible for Farm

Service Agency emergency loans and other assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Unfortunately these loans are rarely used and they do not truly address the heart of the issue. Alabama is in need of immediate assistance. When considering the timetable and severity of the situation in Alabama, prompt action from the Secretary to release additional financial aid, through "Section 32" funds at his disposal, is necessary. Section 32 is a permanent appropriation that since 1935 has earmarked the equivalent of 30% of annual customs receipts to support the farm sector through a variety of activities. Recently, in addition to covering child nutrition programs, Section 32 funds have been used at the discretion of the Secretary to meet the needs of producers that have been impacted by natural disasters. There is no doubt that Alabama fits the criteria; in fact, it is the model for use of Section 32.

While Alabama awaits a decision, and hopefully favorable action by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, I took matters to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Last week, I secured vital funding to provide assistance to our nation's agriculture community that is currently suffering from drought and other natural disasters. The fiscal year 2008 Agriculture Appropriations bill included my provisions to include \$10 million for the Emergency Conservation Program to relieve drought-stricken areas across the nation and an extension of the Livestock Compensation Program from February 28, 2007 to December 31, 2007 included in the fiscal year 2007 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations bill. If enacted, both provisions will begin immediately relieving the effects the drought is having on our agriculture industry across the nation and ensure that those affected have equal access to federal disaster aid. When the full Senate has the opportunity to consider the fiscal year 2008 Agriculture Appropriations bill later this year, I plan to offer a broader amendment to address the needs of producers across the country that have been impacted by the droughts, floods, freezes and other natural disasters this year.

It is clear that even at this early stage, the crop and livestock losses will be heavy throughout our nation. I want to ensure that Alabama's and our country's farmers have access to adequate financial assistance to help them recover from this agricultural disaster. We must minimize the losses for this year and provide an opportunity for producers to weather the storm and get back on their feet.

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